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SUBJECT: PAKISTAN MEDIA REACTION: FEBRUARY 23, 2009

Summary: Monday's newspapers differed in their choice of lead stories. Several major dailies highlighted the report that the NWFP Chief Minister Hoti ordered to "distribute 30,000 assault rifles among 'patriotic people and peace loving groups' to guard their villages and help the police tackle terrorism." Whereas, Prime Minister Gilani's statement promising that the federal government "would not support any move to destabilize the Punjab government" dominated front pages in other newspapers. All newspapers front paged the abduction and swapping of Swat DCO (District Coordination Officer) for two militants. Pakistani military spokesman's remarks that the government is keeping "other options open if peace is not restored in Swat through political negotiations" also received prominent display.

Newspapers ran editorials on a host of subjects including the recent peace deal in Swat, drone attacks, sectarian menace, and the political confrontation etc. The leading mass circulation daily, "Jang," cautioned the government to remain "vigilant and cautious to maintain peace in Swat" as the enemies of Pakistan "will not desist from sabotaging this peace move and changing this 'haven-on-earth' into a hell yet again." Commenting on the peace deals with militants, a prominent columnist Kamal Siddiqi, observed in "The News," that "they are a stopgap arrangement, in many instances, a tactic to buy time or to focus on another operation." However, the Islamabad-based daily, "Pakistan Observer," noted that "all stakeholders must work for consolidation of the agreement (Swat Peace Deal) to ensure lasting peace." End Summary.

News Stories

"Hoti Orders 30,000 Rifles For Civilian Self-Defence" "Daily Times" (02/23)

"NWFP Chief Minister Ameer Haider Khan Hoti has directed officials to distribute 30,000 rifles among 'patriotic people' and 'peace loving groups' to guard their villages and help the police tackle terrorism.... Military spokesman Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas told the Associated Press the army had not been consulted about arming village militias. Interior Ministry spokesman Shahidullah Baig was also unaware of the plan."

"Kidnapped DCO Swapped For Two Militants" "Dawn" (02/23)

"Taliban kidnapped the new District Coordination Officer of Swat, Khushhal Khan, on Sunday, but claimed that he was their guest and they had picked him up for 'discussing important matters.' A

Taliban spokesman said 'We have released the official and his six guards in exchange for our two colleagues.'"

"'Other Options Open' If Peace Not Restored In Swat, Says ISPR"
"Daily Times" (02/23)

"Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Director General Major General Athar Abbas has said that the government is keeping 'other options open' if peace is not restored in Swat through political negotiations, a private TV channel reported in the backdrop of a peace deal between the Taliban and the administration."

"Taliban Form New Alliance In South-North Waziristan" "The News"
(02/23)

"Taliban have formed a new alliance, Shoora Ittihad-ul-Mujahideen, in the twin agencies of Waziristan - North and South - as formal announcement to this effect came on Sunday. Sources told 'The News' that the new alliance would comprise the groups led by central chief of banned Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Baitullah Mahsud and the two reportedly pro-government powerful commanders Maulvi Nazir of South Waziristan Agency and Hafiz Gul Bahadur of North Waziristan tribal region."

"PPP Stalwarts Asked To Exercise Restraint" "Dawn" (02/23)

"Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani assured Chief Minister Mian Shahbaz Sharif on Sunday that the centre would not support any undemocratic move to dislodge or undermine the Punjab government."

"Patterson Leaves For Washington" "Daily Times" (02/23)
"United States Ambassador to Pakistan Anne W. Patterson left for the U.S. on Sunday to participate in upcoming policy review meetings, sources in the Embassy told 'Daily Times.' The sources said she would be a principle participant of the policy review meeting aimed at examining the current US policy in Pakistan and Afghanistan."

"Army Chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani Arrives In U.S." "The Nation" (02/23)

"The Pakistani Army Chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani has arrived in the United States to discuss the proposed comprehensive review of the American policy for Pakistan and Afghanistan. During his week-long tour beginning today, Kayani will have series of meetings with his U.S. counterpart and top officials of Obama administration."

"Clinton Assures Help To Pakistan" "The News" (02/23)

"The American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said that Washington will continue helping Pakistan. Talking to President Asif Ali Zardari on phone she commended Pakistan's efforts to win the war on terror."

"Qureshi To Meet Hillary Clinton Tomorrow" "The News" (02/23)

"Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi embarked on a four-day trip to Washington on Sunday evening to discuss policy options with key members of the Obama administration as it undertakes a vital strategic review of the U.S. war on terror strategy, focusing largely on Afghanistan and Pakistan. The focus of media attention would be Qureshi's first meeting (on Tuesday) with his U.S. counterpart, Hillary Clinton, who reportedly spoke to President Zardari on phone on Saturday in China."

"U.S., Pakistan Poles Apart On Anti-Terrorism Strategy" "Dawn"
(02/23)

"Three key allies in the war against terrorism - the United States, Pakistan and Afghanistan - begin a series of crucial talks in Washington on Monday to devise a common strategy for fighting terrorists.... Like Afghanistan, Pakistan has sent a high-powered delegation, headed by Foreign Minister Mehmood Qureshi. The delegation includes two senior military officials, Director General ISI and Director General Military Operations."

"Pakistan To Allay U.S. Fears On Swat Deal: FM" "The News" (02/23)

"Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has said he will try to allay U.S. fears over the Swat peace accord during a trip to Washington this week. Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told reporters in comments broadcast by a TV channel on Sunday."

"Deal Acceptable In Afghanistan, Not In Pakistan: U.S." "Dawn" (02/21)

"The United States has rejected the truce in Swat but U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates said on Friday that Washington could accept a similar agreement between the government and Taliban militants in Afghanistan. The U.S. rejection was conveyed by its special envoy Richard Holbrooke who called President Asif Ali Zardari on Thursday evening to tell him that the Swat deal was tantamount to surrender by Pakistan."

"Political Parties Support Drone Attacks: U.S. Official" "The Nation" (02/23)

"A senior American official has confirmed that Pakistani political parties including PPP, MQM, ANP, JUI-F and PML-Q have been covertly aiding the U.S. in its Predator drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas despite its leaders' very public protests that they see the attacks as a breach of country's sovereignty, while talking to the Fox News, the U.S. Defense official said."

"4 Militants Die In Bajaur As Peace Talks Fail" "The News" (02/23)

"Four more militants were killed and three others sustained injuries in the ongoing military operation in different areas of Khar and Mamond Tehsils of the troubled Bajaur Agency on Sunday."

"UN official to contact Baloch leader Brahmdagh Bugti" "Kawish" (02/23)

"There are some reports that the UN authorities are now seeking the help of a Baloch nationalist leader Brahmdagh Bugti for the release of the UN official, John Solecki who was kidnapped earlier this month."

"Accord With China On Power Cooperation" "Dawn" (02/23)

"Pakistan and China signed an agreement on Sunday for cooperation in the field of hydel-power generation. Under the agreement, China will provide technical assistance to Pakistan in the field of hydel power generation."

Editorials/Op-eds

"Swat Peace Deal - Beware Of Intriguers," an editorial in the leading mass circulation centrist Urdu daily "Jang" (cir. 300,000) (02/23)

"All the parties of the Swat peace deal, especially the government must remain vigilant and cautious to maintain peace in the valley, and it will have to make use of all the available resources to stop the sponsors of the militants, terrorists, and the extremists from disrupting the peace process, as the enemies of Pakistan will never tolerate this peace move so easily. They will not desist from sabotaging this peace move and changing this 'haven-on-earth' into a nightmare yet again."

"Does The Swat Deal Promise Peace Or More Conflict?," an op-ed by Kamal Siddiqi in the centrist national English daily "The News" (cir. 55,000) (02/23)

"The biggest issue is not only whether the deal can be honored but what happens if it breaks down. Who guarantees it and what are the penalties for violation? Another pertinent matter is whether the TNSM has the ability to deliver.... One can ask, and rightly so, what the long-term objectives of the militants and the religious extremists are. If we look at the history of these deals, it is clear that they are a stopgap arrangement, in many instances, a tactic to buy time or to focus on another operation. There are fears that this deal will allow the militants to focus once again on cross-border activities."

"Guns Fall Silent In Swat," an editorial in the Islamabad-based rightist English daily "Pakistan Observer" (cir. 5,000) (02/23)

"The United States and its western allies have aired their reservations that the agreement would provide a safe haven to the militants and they would again divert their activities for attacks inside Afghanistan.... It (Pakistan) cannot and must not allow the foreign powers to dictate us as to what is in our interest. We cannot afford that our people become cannon fodder, social services like educational institutions, health centers and infrastructure destroyed and helpless people made homeless. It is now time that all stakeholders must work for consolidation of the agreement to ensure lasting peace."

"Deal Brings Hope To Swat," an op-ed by Khalid Munir in the centrist national English daily "The News" (cir. 55,000) (02/23)

"Did anyone ever hear the Taliban demanding enforcement of Nizam-e-Adl? This was never explicitly on their agenda, so why should they concede the power they have gained over the last two years for something they had never asked for? Sufi Mohammad will bring back a long list of impossible-to-implement demands from the Taliban and that is when things will start deteriorating again."

"U.S. & Nifaz-e-Shariah In Swat," an op-ed by Dr. Samiullah Koreshi in the Islamabad-based rightist English daily "Pakistan Observer" (cir. 5,000) (02/23)

"Interestingly U.S. says that a Swat like deal is acceptable in Afghanistan. That is Pakistan is not to be included in humane approach towards the militants. This contradiction is highly illogical and brutal.... It may be recalled that even in the U.S. itself, it was mentioned that implementation of Sharia in Pakistan is in accordance with the Constitution of Pakistan. Therefore foreign policy people in U.S. should not think it in their competent to try to stop implementation of Constitutional provisions."

"The Road To Shariah Courts," an op-ed Amber Darr in the Karachi-based center-left independent national English daily "Dawn" (cir. 55,000) (02/23)

"Although the apprehensions regarding the enforcement of the Shariah are not unfounded, the government's present move itself does not present the greatest danger to Pakistan. The real danger arises if the government fails to realize that the situation in Swat today is not only a result of militancy but rather the culmination of a long process of state-sponsored discrimination and further if it is unable to accept that unless discriminatory policies are consciously curbed and people provided recourse to efficient and genuine justice, the situation in Swat will be replicated elsewhere in the country perhaps with even more dire consequences."

"Conflicting Statements On U.S. Drone Attacks," an editorial in the popular rightist Urdu-language daily "Ausaf" (cir. 10,000) (02/23)

"Defense Minister Chaudhary Ahmad Mukhtar has revealed that the U.S. drones have permission to land on Pakistani soil, but these drones come from Afghanistan. But, the Foreign Minister Qureshi has dismissed these remarks right away. These contradictory statements demonstrate that the government is trying to conceal something wrong. It is true that the Musharraf regime compromised on the national security, sovereignty and national prestige just to please the U.S., but it is beyond our understanding that why is the PPP government covering and honoring the misdeeds of its predecessor?"

"Drone Attacks And Defense Minister," an editorial in the Lahore-based populist center-right Urdu daily "Khabrain" (cir. 50,000) (02/23)

"Talking with journalists in Gujrat, the Defense Minister said that U.S. drones only have landing rights in Pakistan. This statement raises the question: once these planes land, are they then grounded, or do they take off again? Obviously the drones only land so that they can take off again. The minister's statement does not clarify the government's position, only complicates it further."

"Defense Minister's Revelation: Drones Permitted To Land In

Pakistan," an editorial in the Lahore-based independent Urdu daily "Din" (circ. 5000) (02/23)

"The mystery of where the drones take off from must be resolved; however, the Defense Minister has admitted that U.S. drones have landing rights in Pakistan. The question is: where do these drones land, where is this base and why have these satellite-guided planes been allowed to land in Pakistan?"

"Pakistan's Nuclear Assets: In American Target," editorial in the Karachi-based center-right sensationalist Urdu daily "Ummat" (cir. 33,000) (02/23)

"Americans have set their eyes on Pakistani nuclear program from the day one, and it is still their target. Perhaps, that is why the U.S. media keeps on floating such reports time and again. Whereas the Government of Pakistan does not bother to take its own people into confidence on this issue, consequently people rely on the western media, and their news reports."

"Poppy cultivation In Afghanistan And The U.S.," an editorial in liberal Urdu daily "Express" (cir. 100,000) (02/23)

"As far as the issue of western countries buying the entire poppy crop goes [as suggested by U.S. think-tanks], it has not been analyzed how much this operation will cost, apart from the cost of the poppy crop which is estimated to be about \$3,4 billion. It is also not been discussed as to who will carry out this operation. The most important question is: if the U.S. purchases the entire crop, will the militants in Afghanistan allow such a hefty income to slip out of their hands?"
GFeierstein